

Testimony of Melissa Spear
Executive Director of Common Ground
358 Springside Avenue, New Haven, CT 06515
Submitted to the Education Committee
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Honorable Chairs, Members of the Education Committee;

I am Melissa Spear, Executive Director of the New Haven Ecology Project, Inc., the non-profit organization that in 1997 established Common Ground High School, a public charter school under Connecticut's enabling Charter School legislation. I am here today to testify in support of SB 24-AAC.

Current public funding levels for Connecticut charter schools provide Common Ground with only half the average per pupil funding that similar urban schools in Connecticut receive. At Common Ground, our students - 70% from the City of New Haven, 80% young people of color, 60% from low-income families - have made extraordinary strides despite our limited resources.

- In 2008, the percentage of our student scoring "proficient" doubled or nearly doubled in literally every subject area – increasing from 32% to 77% in reading, for instance.
- In 2009, we sustained these gains in every subject area, and gained an additional 10 points in science and math. As a result, Common Ground was the state's only high school to exit No Child Left Behind "in need of improvement" status in either 2008 or 2009.
- In 2010, our students made larger gains than their peers at every other Connecticut high school. In every subject, the percentage of students reaching State Goal either doubled or tripled. We sustained or increased student proficiency levels in every subject, as well.
- And in 2011, our students made their fourth straight year of significant test score gains, surpassing the state average in reading, math, and writing.

Test score gains are not the only measure of our success. For four straight years, more than 93% of our students have been accepted to college, and newly available data shows that in 2010 Common Ground students had a higher graduation rate and lower drop-out rate than the state average. We are fulfilling our promise: creating the next generation of successful college students and productive citizens.

Despite the progress we have made, we recognize that our work is far from done. Our students need to continue to make strides. But if our state's charter schools continue to be underfunded, we simply will not be able to continue make the headway we have made over the last four years. The funding inequity inherent to Connecticut's public school funding system forces us to make very difficult choices *every day* – choices that have real impacts on our student's most basic educational opportunities. Here is what we are facing: We are currently deep in the budgeting process for the 2012-13 school year. We have started with what we think are the most basic educational requirements of our students. We need to add AP Calculus, Physics, and a high level language course to the curriculum in order to keep pace with

the dramatic educational progress our students have made. To reach students not yet demonstrating proficiency on state standards – and despite a 40% drop in ARRA funding for our after-school program - we need to continue the after-school supports that are critical to our student's success. For the first time, Common Ground's pool of highly talented teachers, teachers who fully embrace our mission and vision, are beginning to express their weariness. Our teachers have always understood that teaching at a charter comes with some financial sacrifice. After 3 years of minimal or no salary increase, Common Ground teacher salaries have fallen significantly behind that of teachers in other urban districts. At the same time we are faced with significant new state mandates that will require substantial effort to properly implement. No one argues that Student Success Plans, Common Core State Standards and new Bullying and Harassment initiatives, for example are good for students and deserve to be carefully implemented – but asking staff to take on this work without at least a modest raise is untenable. Meanwhile the cost of providing health benefits to our staff has increased by 25%. Our state unemployment insurance rates have gone up 40%. Fuel oil prices have risen dramatically. Given all of this, if we were to implement all of the programs we need to meet our educational goals, at our current funding level our 2012-2013 budget projects a \$200,000 deficit. As a result, we are now looking at what we can and must cut. Do we provide fewer wrap-around services for our students? Offer fewer challenging courses? Smaller or maybe even no raises for teachers who for years have demonstrated both their commitment and their skill? Or perhaps we invest even less in maintaining our school facility –which is already far more crowded and provides far fewer amenities than other public schools – no library, no gymnasium, no art room, no labs for science, no auditorium. I strongly feel these are NOT choices we should have to make. OUR STUDENTS DESERVE MORE.

I think it is important to add, that while we are very proud of the work we are doing at Common Ground, we by no means see ourselves as better or more capable than our public school counterparts. We are extremely proud, for example, to be located in New Haven, where cutting edge school reform work is being carried out as we speak. New Haven has taken a courageous stand on education reform and is seeing real results in that investment. We also understand that the educational funding reform work being undertaken by the state government is no easy task. We are simply asking for equity—for fair funding to do the work that we do.

Here is the bottom line: We have somewhere around \$9000 less to spend per pupil than the average urban public school in Connecticut and yet our students outpace the state average on almost every measure of educational performance. We are not a failing school; we are a highly successful school. But inadequate funding is slowly eroding our ability to continue to deliver these results – and hurting our students. Costs have gone up, funding has not – clearly an unsustainable equation. At some point, this becomes a simple issue of educational equity. Why should we accept that the education of charter school students – of Common Ground's students - is worth several thousand dollars less than that of their peers at other public schools? Every student is entitled to an adequately funded education – including the students of Common Ground. Governor Malloy's charter school funding proposal goes a long way toward ensuring that our students get what they are entitled to. I hope you will join me in supporting it.